

**Draft
Environmental Assessment**

**Blackleaf WMA/Blindhorse ONA
Trail**



May 2015



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Draft Environmental Assessment CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP), in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), proposes to construct a non-motorized access trail from Ostle (Antelope) Reservoir on the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to connect with US Forest Service (USFS) Trail 153 through the BLM Blindhorse Outstanding Natural Area (ONA). The trailhead would be located at Ostle Reservoir on the Blackleaf WMA and managed by MFWP. The Blackleaf WMA portion of the trail would primarily follow existing two-track roads and trails. A small section of new trail would be constructed. The BLM trail segment would require new trail construction and complete an unencumbered publicly accessible non-motorized travel route from Ostle Reservoir up to the BLM's Blindhorse (ONA). The trail would allow additional non-motorized access into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. This Environmental Assessment applies only to the portion of the proposed trail that is managed by MFWP on the Blackleaf WMA.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 12.9.510 provides direction to MFWP that Habitat Montana contribute to hunting opportunities. MCA 87-1-242 authorizes MFWP to expend funds for the development and maintenance of real property used for wildlife habitat. MCA 23-127 authorizes the upkeep of established trails.

3. Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency):

None

4. Anticipated Schedule:

Public Comment Period: May 20 – June 19, 2015

Decision Notice Published: June/July, 2015

Estimated Construction/Commencement Date: August, 2015

Estimated Completion Date: August, 2015

5. Location affected by proposed action:

The proposed trail project is located in the southern portion of the Blackleaf WMA in FWP Administrative Region 4. The Blackleaf WMA is located approximately 14 miles west of the community of Bynum in Teton County; T26N, R8W (Figures 1, 2, 3).

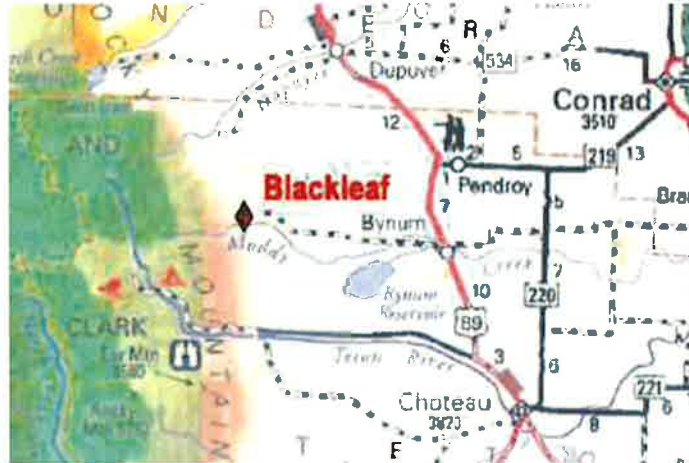


Figure 1. Location of the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area.

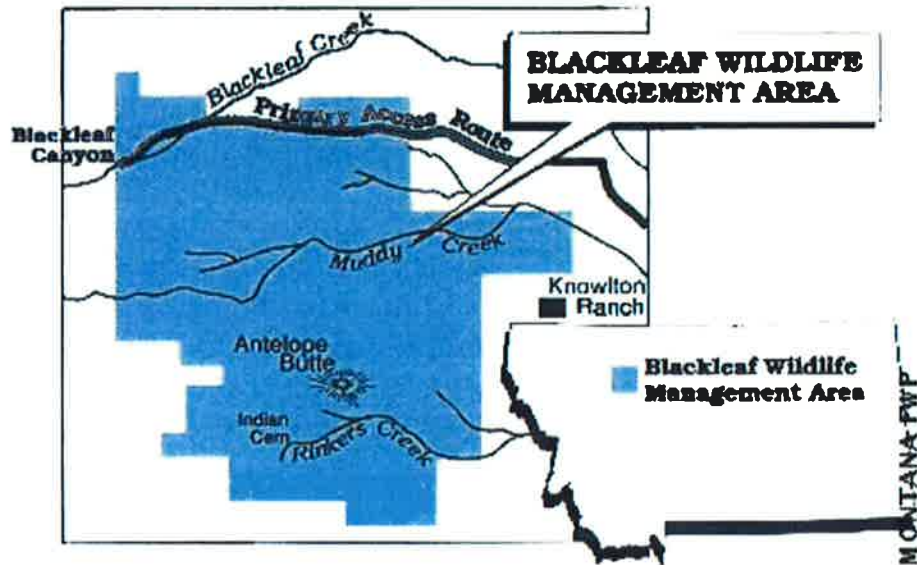


Figure 2. General Map of the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area

6. Estimated project size:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(b) Open Space/ Woodlands/Recreation	<u><5</u>	Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
		Forestry	<u>~1</u>
		Rangeland	<u>0</u>
		Other	<u>0</u>

8. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.

(a) **Permits:** None required.

(b) **Funding:** FWP will provide funding for signage and fencing needs. BLM will provide funding for trail development.

(c) **Other Overlapping Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**

<u>Agency Name:</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
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US Fish & Wildlife Service	threatened/endangered species
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State Historic Preservation Office	cultural clearance
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9. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

The purpose of the proposed action is to provide better access to recreation, including hunting, on the BLM's Blindhorse ONA and USFS lands from Ostle Reservoir located on the Blackleaf WMA (Figure 3). Currently, public access to the Blindhorse ONA is limited to the USFS Trail 106 trailhead, a distance of approximately 9.5 miles from Ostle Reservoir. From this trailhead, the Blindhorse ONA is approximately 6 miles by non-motorized travel on an existing trail system. The Blindhorse ONA can be accessed cross-country from Ostle Reservoir; however, there is no connection to the existing USFS trail system.

MFWP and BLM propose to construct a non-motorized access trail from Ostle Reservoir to connect with the existing trail system on the Blindhorse ONA. The proposed trailhead would be located at Ostle Reservoir on the Blackleaf WMA.

The total length of the proposed trail within the Blackleaf WMA is approximately 2.2 miles (11,650 feet) and would primarily follow an existing two-track road and trails to reduce soil disturbance. The proposed route would require approximately 750 feet of new trail construction on the Blackleaf WMA. The BLM portion of the trail is approximately 0.81 miles (4300 feet) and would consist of mostly new trail construction that follows a route to minimize soil disturbance. The proposed trail would connect to an existing USFS trail system on the Blindhorse ONA and USFS lands and create an additional access route. Construction would be completed by trail crews from the Montana Conservation Corps. Trail use on the Blackleaf WMA would be limited to open periods from May 15th to December 1st on an annual basis.

This is a popular area for outdoor enthusiasts who enjoy hiking, hunting, photography, horseback riding, etc. With the proposed connecting trail, the recreating public would have better access to Blindhorse ONA via a shorter, improved trail.

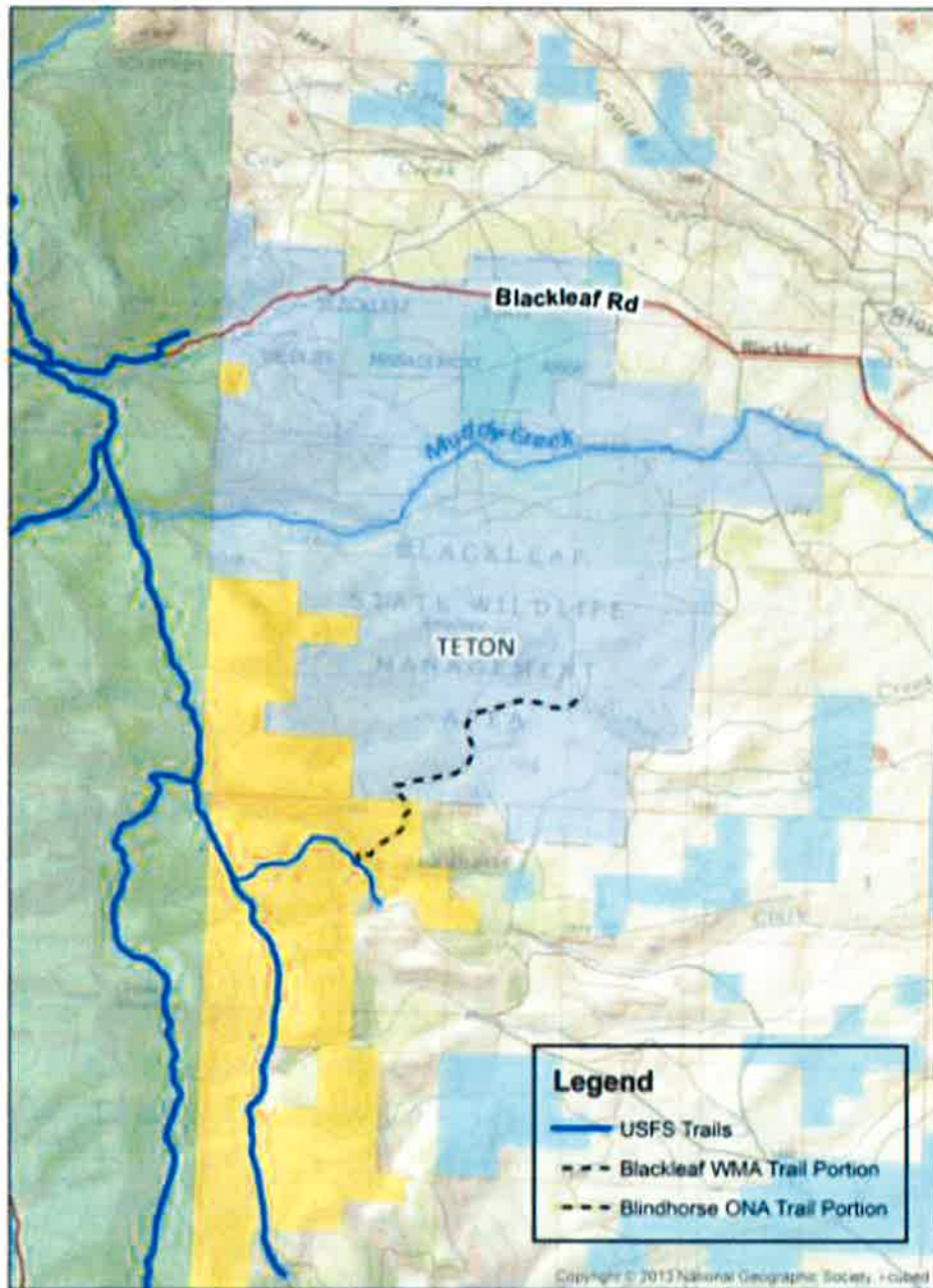


Figure 3. Proposed access trail to the Blindhorse ONA and USFS trail system from the Blackleaf WMA.

10. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

Do not construct the proposed trail segment. The recreating public, both hikers and horseback

riders, would continue to access Blindhorse ONA by traveling 9.5 miles away by road to the Blackleaf Trailhead 106 and then 6 miles by trail or by walking throughout the project area without the benefit of a designated trail.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

The MFWP and BLM proposes a non-motorized trail to provide the recreating public reasonable, unencumbered access from the MFWP managed trailhead located at Ostle Reservoir to the Blindhorse ONA. The proposed project would require improving existing game trails and two-track roads, as well as constructing a new section of trail. The completed trail would provide a connector route from the Blackleaf WMA up to the adjacent USFS lands and Bob Marshall Wilderness. Upon completion, the trail would be seasonally open concurrent with the Blackleaf WMA (currently open May 15 – December 1).

Construction and re-construction of the trail would include using hand tools to create a tread width of approximately 12 – 18 inches along with clearing brush and small trees to accommodate pack horse travel (approximately 4 to 6 foot width). Construction would take approximately two weeks in August 2015. Trail work crews would use non-motorized travel to access and construct the trail, carry bear spray and follow food storage requirements. Sustained trail grades would generally be less than 10% and trail width would be approximately 18" maximum. Clearing of vegetation would require some chainsaw use as well as hand tools. MFWP would install and maintain a gate on the east-west boundary fence that occurs between the Blindhorse ONA and Blackleaf WMA.

11. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

The proposed trail improvements and construction would result in minimal disturbance and impacts. Mitigation that addresses the minor impacts is listed below in the Environmental Review Checklist.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?			X		Yes	1a
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

1a. Construction of the new portion of the trail will result in minor soil disturbance and some initial soil instability on construction that can be mitigated through contemporary trail building measures.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regulations? (Also see 2a.)		X				

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?		X				
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				4c
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Y	4e
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				

4c. There are no reported observations of sensitive plant species (threatened, endangered, or state species of concern) the proposed project area. There two state plant species of concern in the area: autumn willow and Rolland's bulrush. Neither species would be impacted by the proposed action.

4e. Weed management on the Blackleaf WMA is guided by a weed control plan. The proposed project would be monitored for weeds as is the remainder of the WMA utilizing established weed control measures.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?		X				
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X		YES	5g
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				5h
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				

5g. The proposed action is anticipated to increase hunting pressure on game species within the Blindhorse ONA. Current regulations are sufficient to avoid negative impacts to game species.

5h. The proposed project is within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) recovery zone for grizzly bears in the Birch Teton Bear Management Unit (BMU) and Teton subunit. There are no known conflicts with grizzly bears and recreation in the project area. Trail work crews would use non-motorized travel to access and construct the trail, carry bear spray and follow food storage requirements.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.						10f

10f. The proposed trail will require minimal maintenance costs as a majority of the trail will follow existing roads and trails. The Eastslope Backcountry Horsemen have agreed to provide periodic trail maintenance.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X			YES	4a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings?			X		YES	4c
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				

4a. Following construction of the trail, portions may be visible from Ostle Reservoir. Vegetative screening will be used to the extent possible to conceal trail from a distance.

4c. The proposed trail connection would provide better recreational access to the Blindhorse ONA, improving opportunities for hunting, hiking, and wildlife viewing.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				12d

12d. As described in the Blackleaf WMA Management Plan, historical use of the Blackleaf area by Native Americans is well known, but poorly documented. A battle between the Flathead and Piegan (Blackfoot) is said to have occurred in 1859 at a site south west of Antelope Butte, which is within the present-day WMA's boundaries. The first ranch in the area was established in the early 1890's and the Blackleaf School was built in 1898 with homesteading occupancy nearby occurring in the early 20th century. The proposed action will not disturb any of the above sites.

The MFWP feel that there is a low likelihood cultural resources will be impacted. However, Montana State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) will be contacted prior to new ground disturbance. Should cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during this project, work would cease and SHPO would be contacted for further investigation.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:						
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				13a
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				13f
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

13a. The proposed action is expected to have no significant negative cumulative effects on the physical and human environments. Rather, completion of the trail would allow increased recreational opportunities including hunting. Some game hunting by foot may be disrupted by horse travel during the hunting season. However, it is anticipated that the proposed action will increase hunting opportunity in the project area.

13f. No substantial organized public opposition is expected to be generated by the proposed action. Scoping has indicated both pros and cons to the proposed action.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed action would provide increased public access to hunters and recreationists to the Blindhorse ONA and other nearby areas in an area where access is limited.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA:

- Public notices in each of these papers: Conrad *Independent Observer*, Great Falls *Tribune* and Choteau *Acantha*;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days following the publication of the second legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., June 19th, 2015 and can be mailed or emailed to the addresses below:

Blackleaf WMA/Blindhorse ONA Trail
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
514 S Front St., Suite C
Conrad, MT 59425 or rrauscher.fwp@gmail.com

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

No, an EIS is not required. Based on an evaluation of the primary, secondary, and cumulative impacts to the physical and human environment, no significant impacts from the proposed action were identified. In determining the significance of the impacts of the proposed project, FWP assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. FWP assessed the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value affected; any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit FWP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws.

As this EA revealed no significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

2. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:

Ryan Rauscher, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Conrad MT

3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Wildlife: Choteau, Conrad, Great Falls and Helena MT

Enforcement: Choteau, Conrad

Bureau of Land Management, Lewistown

State Historic Preservation Office